

Frequently Asked Questions About the Western Gray Squirrel

1. Q: What is a western gray squirrel?

A: The western gray squirrel is the largest native tree squirrel in the Pacific Northwest. There are three subspecies of western gray squirrel: *Sciurus griseus griseus*, which ranges from central Washington to the western Sierra Nevada Range in central California; *Sciurus griseus anthonyi*, which ranges from the southern tip of the Coast Range into south-central California; and *Sciurus griseus nigripes*, which ranges from south of San Francisco Bay in the central California Coast Range to San Luis Obispo County. Other common names include the silver gray squirrel, California gray squirrel, Oregon gray squirrel, Columbian gray squirrel, and gray squirrel. The western gray squirrel subspecies *Sciurus griseus griseus* is the only member of the genus *Sciurus* native to Washington. Two other members of the genus found in Washington are introduced species: the eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) and the fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*).

2. Q: How are western gray squirrels described?

A: Western gray squirrels are silver gray on the back and creamy white on the underside. The long bushy tail is edged with white, but dark hairs in the tail give it a pepper-gray frost effect. The ears are long, with a light reddish brown area on the back, and are not tufted.

3. Q: Where did the western gray squirrel occur historically and where does it occur today?

A: Historically, the western gray squirrel was once widespread throughout Washington, Oregon, California, and in western Nevada. Currently, the species is rare in Nevada and is absent from the Central Valley in California. Western gray squirrels in California still occur in the interior valley margin of the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, Tehachapi, Little San Bernardino, Santa Rosa, and Laguna Mountains, and west through the Coast Range to the Pacific Coast. In Oregon, the western gray squirrel distribution extends along the southwestern foothills of the Coast Range northward to Coos Bay, and north along the eastern side of the Coast Range and along both sides of the Cascades into Washington.

Western gray squirrels in Washington once ranged from southern Puget Sound south to the Columbia River, east along the Columbia River Gorge in the southern Cascades and north along the eastern slopes of the Cascades to Lake Chelan. Currently, in Washington, only three geographically isolated western gray squirrels populations remain: One in

Thurston and Pierce Counties, one in Klickitat and Yakima Counties, and one in Chelan and Okanogan Counties.

4. Q: What are the primary threats to the western gray squirrel?

A: Threats to some populations of the species include habitat modification and destruction due to fire suppression, logging, overgrazing, highway construction, and residential development. Other threats include fluctuating food supplies, disease, competition, road kills, and illegal shooting. The species is listed as threatened by the State of Washington.

5. Q: What is a 90-day petition finding?

A: When we receive a petition to list, delist, or reclassify a species, we are required to make a finding on whether the petition presents substantial scientific or commercial information to demonstrate the requested action may be warranted. This finding must be made, to the maximum extent practicable, within 90 days from the date we receive the petition. We use information submitted with and referenced in the petition, as well as additional information in our files, as the basis for making the finding. A notice regarding the finding must be published in the *Federal Register*. If there is sufficient information to indicate the species may warrant listing, delisting, or reclassification, the finding will be "positive." A negative finding ends the process. We have made a positive 90-day finding for the subspecies *Sciurus griseus griseus*, which means the available information indicates we need to examine the status of the subspecies more closely to determine if there are populations in Washington that should be listed.

6. Q: What is a status review?

A: A status review is a review of all the available information on a species or subspecies to determine if it should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. A status review must be initiated for a species or subspecies when there is a positive 90-day finding. A positive finding indicates there is substantial information to indicate the species or subspecies may need to be listed. A status review for the western gray squirrel subspecies *Sciurus griseus griseus* is being initiated with the 90-day finding. We are requesting any additional information, comments, and suggestions from the public, other concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, and any other interested parties concerning the status of this subspecies of western gray squirrel. We are seeking information regarding historic and current distribution, habitat use and habitat conditions, biology and ecology, ongoing conservation measures for the subspecies and its habitat, and threats to the subspecies and its habitat.

7. Q: Who submitted the western gray squirrel petition and what was the action they requested?

A: The Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, Bellingham, Washington, and the Tahoma Audubon Society, University Place, Washington submitted a petition requesting the

Washington populations of the western gray squirrel be listed as endangered or threatened. Western gray squirrels in Washington belong to the subspecies *Sciurus griseus griseus*. The petitioners also requested that we emergency list the Washington populations and designate critical habitat with the listing. However, emergency listing and concurrent designation of critical habitat with the listing action are not subject to the petition provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

8. Q: What is a “distinct vertebrate population segment”?

A: A distinct vertebrate population segment is a species’ population that can be protected under the Act as if it were a species if it meets the criteria of our Distinct Vertebrate Population Policy. The Distinct Vertebrate Population Policy was published in the *Federal Register* on February 7, 1996. This policy allows us to apply the protections of the Endangered Species Act to a species’ population that may be threatened or endangered without having to also list healthy populations of the species. The three elements used to assess whether a population meets the criteria for listing under this policy include discreteness and significance of the population segment, as well as the population segment’s conservation status in relation to the Endangered Species Act’s listing requirements. The policy details specific criteria for analyzing each of the three criteria.

9. Q: What happens next in the listing process?

A: The notice of a 90-day petition finding and the initiation of a status review for the subspecies of western gray squirrels found in Washington will include a public comment period. The comment period allows the public to provide additional information and comments on the status of the species. We will prepare and publish a 12-month finding at the end of our status review. A 90-day finding that indicates there may be substantial information to indicate a species, subspecies, or distinct vertebrate population segment may warrant listing does not necessarily indicate the 12-month finding will support listing. In the 12-month finding we may find there are no distinct vertebrate population segments of the subspecies that warrant listing. However, we may find that one or more western gray squirrel populations meet the criteria for listing as distinct vertebrate population segments, and these will be assigned a listing priority number. The listing priority number will be used to determine whether or not the listing is precluded by listing actions with higher priority numbers. If the listing is precluded, a distinct vertebrate population segment will be assigned to candidate status.